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ABSTRACT

A study analyzed the experiences of 10 student teachers, 5 of whom taught in a traditional program and 5 of whom taught without cooperating teachers. The study's purpose was to gain insight into factors influencing views and actions of student teachers and to determine why they did or did not correspond to views they expressed after participating in a reading methods course. Student teachers were observed four times in the classroom, and post-observation discussions were held with the student teachers and (when possible) with supervisors. Interviews were conducted with the student teachers following the practicum. The student teachers began the practicum with views consonant with those espoused in the methods course. Following their experience, they were unanimous in citing factors which influenced their actions and, in some cases, changed their views toward reading instruction. Among those influences were school pressures (including suggestions from cooperating teachers), lack of confidence, discipline problems, limited time, and seeming irrelevance of some content of the methods course. It was observed that, while cooperating teachers had an influence, student teachers who did not have cooperating teachers acted in much the same way as those who did. (Author/JD)

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AN ANALYSIS OF THE VARIABLES INFLUENCING STUDENT TEACHER'S ACTIONS AND VIEWS IN CLASSROOMS WITH AND WITHOUT COOPERATING TEACHERS

A Research Report Presented by

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ABSTRACT

AN ANALYSIS OF THE VARIABLES INFLUENDING STUDENT TEACHERS' ACTIONS AND VIEWS IN CLASSROOMS WITH AND WITHOUT COOPERATING TEACHERS

This report describes and analyzes the experiences of ten pre-service teachers, five of whom taught in a traditional student teaching practicum and five of whom taught in a special practicum without cooperating teachers. The purpose of both of these efforts was to gain insight into the factors influencing the views and actions of the students and to determine why they did or did not correspond to those views earlier espoused by the pre-service teachers after participating in a reading methods course.

The questions asked were: If pre-service teachers student teach in a classroom without the influence of a cooperating teacher, might their views and actions toward teaching reading remain consonant with those espoused in the methods course? Would such an experience strengthen the impact of the course or would there be institutional characteristics inherent in classrooms that dilute that impact? What if any are the unique influences of a cooperating teacher?

Recommendations for strengthening the influence of the methods course are made. In addition, recommendations for future research are given.

IMPLEMENTING METHODS:

IF YOU CAN'T BLAME THE COOPERATING TEACHER WHO CAN YOU BLAME?

Introduction

Research has shown that as their reading methods course fades into past experience, numerous student teachers change their views and actions regarding the teaching of reading in ways that are dissonant with views recommended in earlier reading methods courses. While a review of the literature still reveals a continuing concern on the part of teacher educators about the limited impact that methods courses have on teaching practices, both during student teaching and after, and the considerable impact that cooperating teachers have on their student teachers' approaches to reading, other research and reviews have begun to illustrate the part that the ecological characteristics of classrooms and schools plays in shaping the behavior of those who work in schools. (Alvermann, 1981; Copeland, 1979; Doyle, 1977; Tabachnick, 1980; Zeichner & Tabachnick, 1981). If pre-service teachers student teach in a classroom without the influence of a cooperating teacher, might their views and actions toward teaching remain consonant with those espoused in the methods course? Would such an experience strengthen the impact of the course or would there be institutional characteristics inherent in classrooms that dilute that impact? What if any, are the unique influences of a cooperating teacher?

This report describes and analyzes the experiences of ten pre-service teachers five of whom taught in a traditional student teaching practicum and five of whom taught in a special practicum without cooperating teachers. The purpose of both of these efforts was to gain insight into the factors influencing the views and actions of the students, and to determine why they did or did not correspond to those views earlier espoused by the pre-

service after participating in a reading methods course.

Methodology

The five subjects participating in STUDY A were seniors who had been selected by a faculty panel from a pool of volunteers to take part in a special practicum in a classroom of 15 third and fourth graders. The panel who selected the students was composed of reading and mathematics methods course instructors who had taught the students, supervisors who had supervised their 9-week junior field experience, and the director of student teaching. The students chosen were those who had been judged by the panel to have the highest potential to become successful teachers. During the fall semester, three student teachers were jointly responsible for all instruction; during the spring semester two new student teachers shared the same responsibility. There was no cooperating teacher present at any time. Because the students followed the regular school district calendar, their student teaching experiences were longer than the usual 12-week university practicum and they participated in all of the typical school district activities. Although there was no cooperating teacher, the students were frequently observed and held conferences with a university supervisor and the school principal.

The five subjects participating in STUDY B were seniors who had been chosen because they were student teaching at the same grade level and in the same school system as those in STUDY A. In addition these five subjects were all supervised by the same university supervisor. The 12-week student teaching experience for those subjects was the traditional one in which the students worked in a classroom under the supervision of a cooperating teacher for ten weeks and then were completely responsible for that class-

room for 2 weeks. They were also frequently observed and held conferences with their university supervisor.

Information was gathered through a variety of interviews and observations. The reading methods instructor and his teaching assistants were interviewed to gather information regarding the content that was covered, the reading practices recommended or discouraged, the assignments given, and the text and outside reading used in the methods course. Prior to the practicum, the student teachers were interviewed to ascertain their views on teaching reading and what they hoped to gain from the practicum to further prepare them to teach it. (APPENDIX A) The university supervisors in both studies were interviewed about their ideas regarding the teaching of reading as was the cooperating teacher in STUDY B. (APPENDIX C)

Each student was observed four times in the classroom while teaching reading. For each observation, information concerning the time, materials, audience, and content of instruction was completely recorded in written form to insure that all of the student teacher's actions would be available for analysis. (APPENDIX F) Post-observation time was set aside for discussion with the students and, when possible with the supervisor. Following the practicum, interviews (APPENDIX B) were conducted with the students to discover why they used particular organizational patterns, materials, and instructional procedures.

Results

Reading methods course. The 16-week section of Elementary Education 336, Fundamentals of Reading Techniques, which the students had taken prior to student teaching met twice a week. One 2-hour class period involved a lecture given by an elementary education faculty member. The other 1 hour

class period was a discussion session led by teaching assistants.

The students used Farr and Roser's Teaching a Child to Read, Heilman's Phonics in Proper Perspective, and Silvaroli's Classroom Reading Inventory (CRI) as textbooks. They were required to take two hourly exams and a final, to write one research paper, and to administer the CRI to one child. Lectures included such topics as readiness, diagnosis, various methods of teaching reading, matching students and materials, teaching reading in the content areas, and organizing classrooms. In addition, discussion leaders gave short assignments related to basal readers, comprehension questions, and readiness.

Pre-practicum interview. The fact that the methods course had an initial impact on the students was obvious from the answers to questions in the pre-practicum interview. The student teachers began the practicum with views consonant with those espoused in the methods course. They voiced a desire to implement many of the broad goals discussed in the reading methods course, such as:

1. Developing fluent silent readers through motivating techniques and word recognition and comprehension skills instruction.
2. Developing a positive attitude toward reading by allowing children to read a wide variety of materials in which they were interested.
3. Supplementing basal procedures and materials with individualized methods and materials. Literature groups, teacher-made materials, the language experience approach, and learning centers were popular choices.

4. Diversifying the organizational pattern beyond achievement groups. Interest and skill groups were mentioned by all of the students; individualized reading programs were also high on the list for alternative organizational schemes.

5. Diagnosing formally and informally on a continuing basis. All of the students mentioned using an informal reading inventory as a way of matching students to materials and finding out about their abilities and needs. Each expressed a hope that he or she could "keep on top of things" through the year by observing and informally discussing the students.

It must be noted, however, that although they could express general guidelines, in many areas these students felt anxious about the "how-to-do" specifics of teaching reading. One student put it this way, "I feel reading is very important and it scares me as a teacher. I realize the responsibility that I have. I want the children to learn to read well and also to want to read. But I don't feel that 336 prepared me to work with slow readers, or to keep 20 kids busy while I work with 6; you know, management." Another said, "I know I'm going to have trouble teaching skills. I mean I know what the content of phonics is, but I don't know how to teach any of it. I know you should teach a skill when you see a need for it but I don't think I'll know how unless there is something in the basal." Still a third commented, "I'm really scared about teaching slow readers. It worries me if I'll be sure how to help them. I don't know how to judge a work-sheet. In my methods class, they said we probably wouldn't need to use all of the worksheets included in the workbook, but how do I know if they are good or bad?"

Each of the students expressed a hope that the student teaching experience would help them gain confidence in teaching reading. One stated, "This is where I'm hoping to try out some ideas. We got a lot of theoretical information from our methods class, but that's not very helpful." Another hoped to "find out how to organize kids who have a variety of needs." And over and over the wish was expressed that "I'll find out where to start with skills, and how to present and teach them so that the kids will really know them."

Observations. As indicated earlier, each of the students was observed teaching several items during the practicum. The visits were scheduled so that at least one observation per student was during the first or second week of the semester and the final observation was during the latter part of the semester when each student had complete control of the entire room. The observations revealed that each student was apparently overwhelmed by the actual experiences of teaching reading. Each of the following statements relate to the 5 goals discussed earlier.

1. Although each student had expressed a desire to develop fluent silent readers, much of the time spent in reading groups was devoted to oral round robin reading. In STUDY A, this was true even in the highest reading group, which consisted of only three children. Sustained silent reading was a part of the class only when something else didn't run over into its alloted 20 minutes.

   In STUDY B two of the cooperating teachers requested that round robin reading be continued because "that's what the kids are used to."

2. While all of the student teachers in both studies were concerned about allowing children to read material that interested them, their early attempts at organizing literature groups or integrating social studies with the reading program floundered.
3. As the semester went on the basals became more and more the only reading material used. Although all the student teachers had a desire to use basal material in a selective manner, by the end of the semester the basal had come to completely dominate their lesson planning. Teacher-made materials were introduced less and less.
4. In STUDY A the early attempts to individualize reading, which two of the students tried, slowly disappeared. The four achievement groups which were formed at the beginning of each semester never changed. In STUDY B students were not allowed to have individualized programs. They were requested by their cooperating teachers to continue working with the three or four reading groups which were already in use.
5. The informal reading inventories that were administered by those in STUDY A were used to determine instructional reading levels but were then put in file drawers, as were the results of a standardized diagnostic test which the school district required in all classes. No attempts were made to look for strengths and weaknesses, even for the lowest readers, who were about two years below grade level. Few attempts were made by students in either study to keep informal records of the children's progress through the semester.

Post interview. Research done at the Institute for Research for Teaching (Barr & Duffy, 1978; Bawden, Buike, and Duffy, 1979) has illustrated that teacher's views toward reading instruction appear to be only one of several influences on their actions. Their views are "...filtered through and modified by other influences and, when applied to classroom practice (are) a unique reflections of all these influences." (Bawden, Buike, and Duffy, p. 12) Because the classroom observations illustrated that many of the actions taken by the ten student teachers ran counter to the views that had espoused in the pre-practicum interview, a follow-up interview was conducted to allow the students to reflect on their experiences and to try to explicate some of the variables which they thought had influenced their actions. The students were thus given another opportunity to voice their views toward the teaching of reading.

During the post-practicum interviews the students were unanimous in mentioning the following factors as important in influencing their actions and, in some cases, changing their views toward reading instruction. As will become apparent, these factors are largely similar in both STUDY A and STUDY B. In short, it appears that the influence of the cooperating teacher, although clearly a factor, does not predominate.

1. School pressures was the first variable mentioned by each student, thus supporting the work cited earlier (Copeland, 1979, and Doyle, 1977) on ecological factors. When students in STUDY A attempted to use an individualized reading program with one of their reading groups or tried to change basals, they were told by both the principal and other teachers in the school that reading instruction was to come from a basal and that only a certain basal could be used. The students were also strongly urged by some school

personnel to teach reading using conventional achievement groups. It wasn't until almost the last month that the students found that some veteran teachers in the school had managed to "get around" these "rules."

Students in STUDY B were introduced to the reading groups gradually by their cooperating teachers. They initially observed their cooperating teacher teach each group, then they were allowed to plan and teach one reading group (usually the lowest) for awhile, before being allowed to teach more than one group. However, even during the two week period in which they were completely in charge of the whole room, two of the cooperating teachers strongly urged them to follow the basal manual so that the elementary students would not "get confused or miss something important." While three of the five were free to structure their reading groups in any manner they chose, they tended to model the cooperating teacher even though that model was dissonant with their earlier views, because as one stated, "It seems to work." One student teacher reflected, "Maybe when I have my own class I'll experiment more, not follow the teacher's manual so strictly. I felt I should follow what my cooperating teacher did. If I goofed, it would reflect on my cooperating teacher." The student teachers had been told in their methods course that many school reading programs were basal-oriented, but they had not been provided with practical assignments which would help them to use a basal wisely while providing enrichment and/or remediation through other means. Comments similar to the following were frequently heard. "I

considered changing basals but the administration was against it. My low group was in the dullest basal around;" or There weren't other materials available and I didn't know how to supplement the basal."

2. Lack of confidence was another factor often mentioned. Even though each student had previously voiced a desire to supplement basal procedures and materials with individualized methods and materials, the information obtained through follow-up interviews revealed that basal materials were followed closely and seldom supplemented because the students felt something "important" might be missed and because they were not sure of either their ability to diagnose skill needs or to teach the skills on their own. One student commented, "I didn't like the workbooks and I didn't like the way I set things up, but I didn't know and still don't know what else to do." Another stated, "I'm still scared. I don't know how to teach sight words or skills. If I get a job teaching first grades my kids will never learn to read." The reality of their classroom experiences had convinced them to change their actions and their views regarding the use of supplementary materials and individualized methods. As one student in STUDY A expressed it, "When I started this practicum I thought that I would only use the basal as the skeleton of my program. I did not want to follow the teacher's guide, but I found out that I'm not prepared to do what I wanted to do. I'm not even sure that I use the basal right. I know the basal is made by experts. I'll use it for my classroom in the fall. Maybe after I teach for

a couple of years; I'll try something else." Although the methods course taught the content of reading, these students didn't have a good grasp of the methods used to teach the content.

3. Classroom survival was also an important variable influencing their decisions. Management and control were often the most immediate concerns. For students in STUDY A sometimes just keeping 15 children quiet and busy became the primary reason for an assignment. One student noted, "My frustrations came from discipline problems. These children didn't know how to behave, they worked inefficiently and were irresponsible. I always had to spend so much time keeping them quiet that I hardly had time to teach anything." A student in STUDY B said, "I had a lot of trouble with behavior problems in my reading groups. The kids spend a lot of time talking. It was hard to get and keep their attention." Although classroom management and organization were discussed in the methods course, the students did not have the opportunity to practice the techniques, so they tended to forget them or to underestimate their importance.
4. Limited time was another important influence. Other subjects had to be taught in addition to reading. One student stated, "All of the neat things I wanted to do took too much time. I never had enough time to give background or teach vocabulary; we'd just read the story and do the worksheets." Another commented, "It's so hard to juggle time and keep kids on task with things to do. I didn't have enough independent activities ready to keep individual

kids working while I worked with a group, and I found I had little time to make or plan activities." Listening to group oral reading, getting through the basal, and grading worksheets became important concerns for these students. "Maybe after I've taught for awhile I'll try something other than groups. But in the Fall, I want to be able to get three groups going well. I need more practice in management. It's not as easy as I thought." And, "Maybe some of my ideas about individualizing were unrealistic. I think I'll try groups like my cooperating teacher does."

5. The content of the methods course was also an important factor in the decision-making process for these students. It was a case of too much too soon and not enough soon enough. The topics emphasized in the methods course did not make an impact upon the students until they actually experienced those elements of the reading program; but by then it was too late. They had forgotten much of what they had heard. In addition, some topics, such as dealing with outside pressures, did not appear to have been covered at all.

Typical comments were, "I learned what reading was supposed to consist of--you know graphemes, phonemes, that stuff--but we need more than one course in reading. I'd call 336 a theory course--kind of what is the content of reading. But we also need a course on how to teach those things." Another said, "We got a lot about what not to do but we didn't get many suggestions for what to do instead... like don't depend on round robin reading. Fine, but what do I do when someone says they like to read orally? I didn't know any other way to do oral reading." A third mentioned, "In the whole university

there is not enough hands-on-we need to be out working while we are learning. We need to have situations where we can say---here's how I'd handle that. You can't be taught some things in isolation; you have to be thrown into a situation." And finally one stated, "I thought I knew how to teach reading and just needed practice. Now I know that some of my original ideas were fine for an experienced teacher but not for me. Some of my ideas were good but not realistic for where I am right now. The experience helped me to see what I can and cannot do at first."

Conclusions and Implications

Teacher educators have been too ready to blame the impact of the cooperating teacher for many of the poor teaching practices seen in student teaching situations and later in regular classrooms. The interviews and observations which were a part of each these studies illustrate that even pre-service teachers who do not have a cooperating teacher often act in ways that are dissonant with views they espoused immediately after taking a reading methods course. And, in some cases, they even change their views toward reading instruction. While cooperating teachers undoubtedly have a great deal of influence on the student teachers in their rooms, this influence wasn't too much different from the other school pressures found in category one of the factors influencing student teachers actions and views. There will always be external voices who urge a new-comer to do it the "tried and true" way. Neophytes must learn to incorporate the good advice of others while maintaining the integrity of their own program. However, school pressures, were only one category of variables found to influence these student teachers. An analysis of both studies shows that lack of confidence, classroom survival, limited time, and the content of

the methods course were also important factors for all ten student teachers. While there is evidence from STUDY B to suggest that the cooperating teachers in that study could have benefited from formal training in supervisory and evaluative techniques, it is also evident that all ten of the student teachers were ill-prepared by their reading methods course to handle their classrooms on their own.

Each of the student teachers expressed the fear of being unsure of "how to teach." They knew what to teach and even were familiar with some diagnostic tools, but they did not know that to do with the information they had. While there is no magic in "how to teach," we must introduce our pre-service teacher to the simple steps of apprising pupils of what is being taught and why it is being taught and why it is important, of demonstrating and modeling skills, of giving practice in the skills, of providing feedback, and of "recycling: the students who have difficulty.

However, a methods course must do more than simply present the content and a few skills and resources. A simple level of awareness is not enough. Our pre-service teachers, too, must receive practice and feedback in using these methods. They, too, must be "recycled" if their learning is not complete.

One conclusion which may be drawn from this program is that instruction in the teaching of reading should be a continual process. It should begin with a pre-service course which offers some basic instruction interspersed with real or videotaped observations of classroom teaching exemplifying the instruction discussed in class. In addition, the students should be allowed to try out some reading lessons to prepare themselves for their student teaching practicum. Instruction should continue into student teaching, where it would provide support, enrichment and remediation if

necessary. It should also follow student teaching so that pre-service teachers can benefit from their new understandings of what teaching reading in a "real world" classroom is all about. And, in the best of all words, it should be coordinated with in-service so that the new situations, demands, and pressures that the neophyte teacher will experience can be met with further instruction and guidance. None of these ideas is new. Programs at a variety of institutions have included such diverse offerings as pre-service tutoring experiences, the protocol movement, (with its associated videotapes and films), micro-teaching, combined reading methods/practicum courses, and performance or competency field-based experiences. However, none of these various offerings have been adequately evaluated. Professional educators who are designing these alternative teacher preparation programs often appear to be operating on expert hunches.

There is a need for longitudinal studies which take a more in-depth look at variables, such as those discussed in this report, which have the greatest effect on forming and changing pre-service teachers' views and actions regarding teaching. Although this effort concentrated on pre-service reading instruction, its implications can be generalized to other methods courses. Does coursework in reading or any other curriculum area have any long term effect on the beliefs and teaching practices of pre-service teachers if that coursework is not directly related to the pressures and day to day responsibilities connected with classroom teaching? What are the most important components of that coursework? Does the placement of courses relative to the practicum have any bearing on the formation of views and actions regarding teaching? Will direct observation of superior teaching help? What about using films or videotapes of those same

superior superior teachers? Do analytical discussions that follow the viewing of films stimulate reflection in a student? Answers to questions such as these can only be found by well-evaluated longitudinal studies which might begin to identify ways that we can help pre-service teachers make better informed instructional decisions.

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